



DePaul University  
**Via Sapiientiae**

---

Asian American Art Oral History Project

Asian American Art Oral History Project

---

Winter 3-11-2017

## Sarah Nishiura Interview

Larry Villanueva

*DePaul University*, [lvillanueva1993@gmail.com](mailto:lvillanueva1993@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral\\_his\\_series](https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series)



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Fiber, Textile, and Weaving Arts Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Villanueva, Larry. (2017) Sarah Nishiura Interview.

[https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral\\_his\\_series/89](https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/89)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian American Art Oral History Project at Via Sapiientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian American Art Oral History Project by an authorized administrator of Via Sapiientiae. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

**Interviewer:** Larry Villanueva

**Artist:** Sarah Nishiura

**Location:** In person – Chicago, IL Albany Park

**Date:** February 7, 2017



Photo courtesy of the artist.

*Note: the following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Art History during the 2017 Winter Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project. Conducted by Laura Kina, Professor Art, and Media & Design.*

**Bio:** Sarah Nishiura grew up in Detroit and now lives in Chicago, where she makes paintings, drawings, prints and quilts. She learned to sew from her mother and learned to love geometry from her father. From her grandparents, who were great builders, painters, stitchers, weavers and gardeners, she learned that making things is one of the greatest imperatives, privileges and pleasures in life.

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Larry Villanueva:** The first question is... just tell me a little bit about yourself. I had seen on the Internet you had grown up in Detroit?

**Sarah Nishiura:** Yeah, I grew up in Detroit. Everyone asks that because a lot of people think I must've grown up in the suburbs. My parents were both academics at Wayne State University and I lived there until I went away to college. I was there through the seventies and eighties and moved east for college. Ended up moving to Chicago just because I finished college and I didn't know what I was going to do and I had friends here, and a lot of my Detroit friends moved to Chicago, so there was a community of people already here for me.

**LV:** Oh nice.

**SN:** And I was interested in being an artist and this was a good city in that it was affordable and you could get space and all those things, so it was a good place to be. So my background is in studying visual arts and painting mostly- painting, drawing, printmaking, that kind of thing but painting was my real focus. But I went to a liberal arts school, so I studied a range of things [laughs]. And then I went to grad school for painting in Philadelphia, and after that spent some time in Italy and came back here. Got married and really got into quilt making and working with textiles when my son was a toddler and painting wasn't very practical for my life. But I've always loved textiles and I'd always sew and my mother taught me to sew when I was a kid. So I had long standing interest in textiles. And my paintings were abstract and based on patterns and things that sort of relate to textiles, so I was always sort of studying them even though I wasn't necessarily making them. And so now I'm a quilt maker and I work in a pretty traditional way except that the designs are all my own. So they're not historic patterns but I make things that are functional. If people want to use them functionally, I end up making them and letting them do what they want. So sometimes they end up on a wall and sometimes they end up on a bed. That's kind of, not something I care about that much, except that I make them with the intention that they fit into that tradition.

**LV:** Nice, that's awesome...Second question, how would you define/categorize your art? You mentioned before how you've used a variety of mediums and which one would you say is maybe your preferred medium today?

**SN:** Really quilt making, I do printmaking and drawing still, but I don't have a lot of space and it sort of requires ending one project to spring in another so I mostly sew. Quilt making is very slow [laughs], so is it really possible to work on a lot of different things at once? But I also just really love it, and I love that tradition and for me personally I sort of found my happy place in art, I think, when I stopped just trying to make things that were in the world of fine arts galleries, that kind of world, and more have a longer tradition that's more maybe democratic or wider to our culture and our history. So I'm really interested in the sort of craft aspect of it and also the tradition of it, and how that fits in rather trying to have my stuff necessarily in the museums or that sort of context.

**LV:** When did you first get involved with quilting? I know that you said...

**SN:** Yeah, when Henry was a toddler I really got involved in it. I had a situation where I had a painting studio set up and just things that happened with the landlord, we lost the lease on it so I very quickly had to get out of that space and that was when he was really little and I just knew I couldn't paint in the living room, and so all that stuff just kind of got packed up. I had been doing some quilting, more just for friends and gifts- that kind of thing. And so I just sort of thought, this is something I can do in my living room with people, with cats, and toddlers and things like that [laughs] it's not so messy. That's when quilt making really kind of took over, and once I started doing it and thinking about it, the same way I thought about my art as oppose[d] [to] just thinking about it as a present for a kid, a baby, or whatever. Then I think my gears really started going and I started getting more interested in what was the potential of it.

**LV:** Yeah, that's crazy, how...I'm assuming you did that a lot before you started, like as you were painting you would do that right?

**SN:** A little bit, yeah. Very much for like friends having babies, gifts, you know...that kind of thing.

**LV:** Then you just turned into something else...I read online that you contributed a quilt that rose over, what was it? ...\$1,800? Is what I read. And so tell me a little bit about your contributions efforts in the Japanese earthquake crisis in 2011.

**SN:** Well that was a crazy thing, because I actually read about that in the New York Times, that they were doing this auction. I didn't know those people. I didn't know anything about it but I was really distressed by the news. I literally wrote a cold email to people I didn't know and said are you looking for donations and this is what I do. And they got right back to me and were like, we love your work and would you be willing to consider one of- you know, they named some of the quilts that were on the website so I was like, of course. The amount, the success that piece had was surprising to me just because I was sort of putting myself in a world that I didn't know how they would see what I did. So that was a really good feeling, to be successful, but it's also sort of was a springboard for relationships I still have. Because the people who were a big part of that auction now run a website selling work, they sell my quilts [laughs]. It worked out, it was a good friendship that developed out of that.

**LV:** It's crazy how life works.

**SN:** Yeah, and you know it was a good lesson for me because I'm a little bit shy about the marketing side of my work and that was like: you know what? You could just sometimes reach out and it works and if it doesn't, it doesn't. It always feels good to do that kind of thing.

**LV:** The next question kind of ties with what you just said, so how difficult has it been to market custom made quilts?

**SN:** It's really hard, I don't know if it's any harder for me than trying to do it in the art world would have been. Because... I think, that artists are not necessarily good at that part, and the artists that are most successful are the artists who are the best at that. So part of it is that quilt making is not considered something that galleries or museums show, or that traditional collectors collect so, you kind of have to convince people to buy your work. And I think all craft artists struggle with the fact that lot of work and time goes into things, and so you want to price things accordingly. Unfortunately, you're competing, in that world, if you're trying to show somebody that you made a quote-on-quote "bedspread"- you just say, but pay all this money for mine. But if I was in the art world, I could say: you know, the equivalence of something that's a certain size is selling for an equivalent price. So there is a certain level of dealing with the fact that that market doesn't really exist. Or it's very very specialized and small, so it's hard and I wouldn't necessarily say I'm successful at it. But I try, and I have successes at it, whether or not I'm completely successful is, I realize not the right question. It's more about, just you know, every time you have a success, that's worth counting.

**LV:** Yeah, and know were going to kind of tie into the Asian American culture aspect of the class. Question number six is: Do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity or themes in your artwork?

**SN:** I think I do it. I look at a lot of Asian textiles and I grew up with a lot of art in my family and craft in my family. Particularly, I'm only half Japanese and on my father's side, they were immigrants to the U.S. around the turn of the twentieth century and they brought with them a lot of craft skills from Japan. I sort of grew up knowing that and honoring that. And my grandfather was a painter, and he had skills in sort of traditional Sumi painting, as well as more western art styles. I grew up with these things in my house and books about it and those kinds of things. I think I have a lot of awareness of those things from a really young age, and then I have made a sort of deliberate study of Japanese textiles in my non-academic way [laughs] towards my art, it just interests me a lot. Yeah, so I look at a lot Asian textiles- I also look at a lot of... all kinds of non-western textiles as a way to sort of break out of whatever is the traditional expectation of quilts. I look at a lot of African textiles as well as a lot of Japanese textile design, and things like that. I think that people will often see an easy connection in just the way they look, even though they're a very American tradition. More recently, I'm just interested in ways of talking about my identity and my history as a way to make that history more public. And I think that's a lot of Japanese American artists, people whose family have been through internment and things like you were talking about, the current political moment. I'm working on a project right now, which I hope will come together, talking about, it's a project I've worked on before with different communities. Bringing different communities together to talk about craft and to make things, and what crafts are traditional to their culture. So we're hoping to put one together that deals with Japanese Americans in Chicago and also African Americans in Chicago and talk about quilt making and some other things. Quilt making is a real community building, history, and process, so even though my work is very much in my own studio, I like to always try and bring community into that and really have honest discussions about diversity. It's not necessarily evident in the stuff that you see, but it's evident in sort of the outlook that I have about making stuff and craft, and history, and culture, and those connections.

**LV:** Yeah that ties into the next question [laughs].

**SN:** I'm jumping ahead [laughs].

**LV:** You're really easy to interview, I didn't even have to ask you. The last question was going to be what are you currently working on? So I'm kind of curious...like you said it's a community thing, so are you working with an organization? A local organization? Or is it...

**SN:** Yeah, so there's an organization here called Project Prospera, and the woman who runs it has organized, in the past, a group of different cultural craft workshops.<sup>1</sup> And so in the past she's always had them located in one community's space, so for example, like the Ethiopian Cultural museum or the Cambodian Killing Fields museum or some of these different places. But bringing a crafts person who is from another culture into that space. She did one with a Palestinian traditional embroiderer who taught some embroidery lessons and talked about her

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.projectprospera.com/>

tradition but in the space of the Ethiopian museum, so that they could talk about their space and what that means to them. She's done these interesting workshops, so I'm sort of doing one with her now, I've just attended them in the past. I'm trying to work on one with her now, and this one less than being about immigration is going to be about migration. We're going to hopefully talk about the connections of just physical neighborhoods of a lot of Japanese Americans who moved to Chicago after WWII, leaving the camps on the west coast and coming to Chicago. Also, African Americans who settled coming up from the south, so migration from the south to the north, into some neighborhoods that sometimes butted right up against each other during a similar time period. Quilting in the African American community is a really important way, still today, of expressing stories about your history and connections to your culture. Quilting not so much, but definitely craft as part of the experience of internment and resettlement and so its just sort of... you don't know what these things are going to be until they happen. So that's sort of the layout of what were thinking about doing, so having it maybe in one of the Japanese American community spaces or a temple or something like that. I teach quilting quite a lot and I teach on the south side, inviting some of the quilters that I know down there to come and talk about what quilting means to them as African Americans in Chicago. Its kind of a way of just showing a richer portrait of Chicago and then at the same time, talking about quilting and having the people who are there, all work together, on quilting, probably one piece, but we don't really know yet. Making something.

**End**